SELLING SKINNY:
MARKETING, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND FEMALE BODY IMAGE

Unnati Shukla

TC 660H
Plan II Honors Program
The University of Texas at Austin

May 1, 2017

_____

Jonathan Highbarger
Marketing
Supervising Professor

_____

Dr. Linda Golden
Marketing
Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Author: Unnati Shukla

Title: Selling Skinny: Marketing, Social Media, and Female Body Image

Supervising Professor: Jonathan Highbarger

Although eating disorders are a psychiatric problem, the increasing prevalence in diagnoses has been attributed to the relationship between marketing's portrayal of a body ideal and how it manifests into consumer body dissatisfaction. Additionally, as society moves toward a more digital space, a consumer's exposure to marketing has risen due to the dissemination of Internet and social media content. This relationship becomes increasingly blurred as consumers are now becoming content creators, and marketing exposure is less formal and less regulated. Applying the concepts of the relationship between traditional marketing and body ideals, how has the Internet and social media contributed to the current landscape of female body image? This is the question this paper seeks to answer.

The first task is to understand how traditional marketing in the past several decades has created a thin ideal that female consumers are expected to conform to. The second task is to discover how to apply consumer behavior theories to a more digital age of marketing that incorporates Internet and social media usage. Third, I will examine how these components contribute to the modern landscape of female body image, and the implications of an emerging ideal. Finally, I will examine the effectiveness of body positivity and media literacy campaign in order to understand how to efficiently change consumer and societal body dissatisfaction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO BODY IMAGE

Although eating disorders are pervasively believed to be mainly psychiatric in nature, they are also symptomatic of a social problem, clinical factors cannot solely account for the sharp increases of disordered eating practices over the past half-century. This thesis provides an in-depth look at the socio-cultural aspects of body dysmorphia, which can often manifest in eating disorders, and may explain this growing phenomenon.

Many influences have been noted as formative in the development and maintenance of shape and weight-related disorders. These factors include, but are not limited to, appearance-related teasing or critical comments from peers, psychiatric disturbance, negative emotionality, and elevated social comparison tendencies. However, sociocultural factors, particularly the role of the media in marketing and advertising, have recently received the most attention as a possible contributor to body image disturbance and eating dysfunctions.[1]

Thompson and Heinberg suggest that mass media are the most potent and pervasive communicators of sociocultural standards, and define media and marketing as "modes of communication that generate messages designed for very large, heterogenous, and anonymous audience solely to generate profit".[2] The impact of today's visual media is different from the effect of the visual arts of the past. Historically, artistic works, for example Botticelli's Venus, were romanticized as otherworldly and unattainable. In contrast, print and electronic media

[1] Thompson, K., & Heinberg, Leslie J. (1999). The Media's Influence on Body Image Disturbance and Eating Disorders: We've Reviled Them, Now Can We Rehabilitate Them? *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(2), 338 – 353.

[2] Ibid.

images blur the boundaries between a fictionalized ideal and reality and often suggest, overtly or implicitly, that a person need only comply with this image provided as a guideline to achieve the ideal.

Diagnosed eating disorders may only be the visible tip of the iceberg of a contemporary obsession and preoccupation with food and body shape. Most research undertaken to date has been from social science or a medical perspective. Little academic marketing research has been directed to investigating body image as a problematic aspect of consumer behavior or marketing. However, there are discussions suggesting that advertising may be partially responsible for dysmorphic and disordered problems because of the use of emaciated models and how it appeals to the desirability of a slim body (e.g., Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly*)

In this thesis, I discuss how marketing and media are one of the main contributing sociocultural factors in outlining the ideal female body, and how the dissemination and increased exposure of media images has resulted in an increased risk of awareness and internalization of body dissatisfaction among female consumers. Although analyses in the past have been conducted studying the lack of diverse representation in advertising, entertainment, and media in general, few have been done to dissect the culture around body dissatisfaction. This is especially to society given body image visibility is increasing with improving technology and social media trends.

At its core, however, causal relationships cannot be made. It is difficult to attribute a macro-phenomenon as the sole contributing factor to cultivation of body dysmorphia and body dysmorphic-focused disorders. At its best, we can only dissect the relationship between media representation and body image dissemination, and there is a visible relationship in time between

consumer behavior and the increasing prevalence of body dysmorphia and body image concerns across the female demographic.

Acknowledging the relationship between an individual psychological and broader socio-economic context could provide a new, theoretical "social psychological" perspective into how body dysmorphia can be manifested and disseminated, as well as potential solutions to these disordered behaviors.[3] Another theme of the paper is that the causal determinants of body image perceptions are complex and multifaceted – media and marketing influences on body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are only one function of a host of interrelated psychological and normative processes. Accordingly, this paper argues that media-based interventions to ameliorate dysfunctional body image perceptions must take these exquisite complexities into account if they are to nudge individuals into changing their attitudes and behaviors.

This study examines how media exposure and media comparisons are related to internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction. It places an emphasis on what the modern-day landscape of female body image looks like, given the societal shift towards the Internet and social media as our main marketing communications. The mass media have shaped and reinforced the current cultural appearance ideals, which emphasize thinness for women, through an increasing over-representation of perfected images that do not reflect most the general population's appearance. Computer manipulation techniques routinely develop idealized media images, such as airbrushing (for example, slimming thighs and increasing muscle tone). The resulting images present an unobtainable 'aesthetic perfection' that has no basis in biological reality. Numerous professionals, parents, and adolescents find the media's status as a cause of

[3] Hesse-Biber, S., Leavy, P., Quinn, C. E., & Zoino, J. (2006). The mass marketing of disordered eating and Eating Disorders: The social psychology of women, thinness, and culture. *Women's Studies International Forum,29*(2), 208-224.

body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and eating disorders to be self-evident, referred to Dr. Highbarger, the advisor of this thesis, as "proving air." We, as consumers, already know that there is a problem, but still have not taken substantial action to address the issue.

Causal or probable relationships between media representations and body image have been regularly and theoretically posed since the late 1970s, when Orbach noted the tendency for the media to produce a picture of ideal femininity that is far removed from the reality of an average body.[4] Mazur makes a claim for how the cultural standard for the ideal female body image is continually changing, and suggests that there has been a societal trend toward a thinner standard for female body images.[5]

Given the historical concerns about media effects on women's body image and self-concept, the focus of this paper is on adolescent girls and young adult women. The reader should note that all cited studies that follow are based on U.S.A. samples, unless otherwise indicated.

What is Body Image?

One consequence of exposure to such unrealistic and generally unobtainable media portrayals among female viewers is body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction – the negative evaluation of one's physical features– can be either specific to particular body parts (for example, the hips, stomach, and thighs) or an overall negative evaluation of one's body as a whole.[6] This is of concern because such dissatisfaction is associated with negative affect and mental illnesses

[4] Orbach, Susie. *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. Arrow Publishing. New York, NY. January 5th 2006.

[5] Mazur, Allan. "U.S Trends in Feminine Beauty and Overadaptation." *The Journal of Sex Research*. Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 281-303. August, 1986.

[6] Quigg, Stephanie L. and Want, Stephen C. "Highlighting media modifications: Can a television commercial mitigate the effects of music videos on female appearance satisfaction?" *Body Image*. Volume 8, Issue 2, March 2011, pp. 135 – 142.

such as depression.[7] Therefore, it is important to investigate means for reducing the detrimental effects that women experience from exposure to thin and attractive media portrayals.

Body image is a complex concept that can be assessed and classified in several ways. It is evident that body dissatisfaction can influence eating disorders. But note that eating disorders themselves are the result of an individualistic, psychological process. A detailed discussion of the development of eating disorders at a micro-level varies among each consumer, and a case-by-case analysis must be conducted at an individual level to truly understand what factors have catalyzed an eating disorder in each patient. However, marketing and media as sociocultural factors that influence body image concerns at a macro-level is what this thesis aims to focus on. This thesis will analyze modern marketing's role in manifesting body dissatisfaction from a consumer behavior perspective.

An individual's perceived body image is a subjective idea of one's own physical appearance established both by their own self-observation and through social comparison. A problem arises once someone starts to relate value to their perceived body image – potentially engulfing their identity and perceptions of how their environment perceives them.

There is a distinct relationship between the reality of one's physical appearance and their perceived body image. This disparity in actual versus ideal state will be discussed later in this thesis. The gap between actual and ideal-self developed during the mid-twentieth century as societal standards were no longer representative of the consumer population. These standards established by society are used as criteria for a consumer's own perceived body image. Because

[7] Ibid.

of these discrepancies, many individuals face body image dissatisfaction because they perceive their own bodies as not ideal.

This psychological internalization of an observer's perspective toward one's body can lead to body surveillance, which in turn can produce body image disturbances, an experience so common it has been famously termed "normative discontent." This normative discontent and expectation for women to have negative body image has been leveraged by marketers for the past several decades. It can be argued that marketing exposure has catalyzed normative discontent, and then continued to use this for a firm's own capitalistic gain. This issue is multifaceted and this thesis is a beginning to dissecting components of it at a societal level. It falls in the context of a feminist issue of whether society is negating the value of women by picking at their bodies. Furthermore, the fact that marketers are capitalizing on this normative discontent of female body image among consumers for monetary purposes is a larger contextual issue.

Subtleties of Intolerance

Culture shapes a society's marketing techniques, and it can be argued that advertising and marketing are an extension of these cultural values. The two are integrally and cyclically correlated. By portraying a body ideal as a homogenous look – a thin, arguably Caucasian, female – it may be a microcosm of American values and intolerances of diversity. Not until relatively recently, with the assimilation of different cultures and the introduction of a more curvaceous look, have we seen diversity in representation – in terms of both race and size. Traditional marketing's use of a homogenous body ideal speaks about America's historical intolerance and lack of celebration of diversity.

It should be noted that body ideals are just one point in the map of beauty ideals – many more factors come into play when the terminology and concepts of "self-image" and "beauty" are introduced. In the context of this thesis, the term "diversity" will refer to specifically diversity in body size, shape, weight, etc. Although diversity and representation is a much broader issue that should be addressed separately, this again proves to be outside the scope of this analysis. Additionally, it can be argued that beauty is a more subjective concept that varies individually among consumers, whereas body ideals are more measurable and numeric – researching the latter is arguably more feasible and concrete.

We sell products as an ideal, and traditionally bodies have been a secondary message portrayed through the media that has been internalized by American society. Body ideal imagery can appear in two forms: subtly through marketing, or explicitly through health/fitness/body-centric media that may not necessarily be "selling" anything. Traditional marketing has utilized this subtlety to cultivate a body ideal over the past several decades. More recently, we have seen an explicit portrayal of thin-ideal imagery in thinspiration and fitspo content. This thesis analyzes both types of body ideal imagery messaging through a consumer behavior lens, and attempt to address the societal context and bigger picture issues of this type of representation. The next chapter discusses body ideals in traditional marketing from 1960 – present day.

CHAPTER TWO

TRADITIONAL MARKETING AND THE THIN IDEAL

Historical Context

Over the past several decades, traditional marketing has created a body ideal, more specifically, a thin, female, body ideal, that consumers feel pressured to conform to. Several studies have been conducted on traditional marketing's role in cultivating consumer body dissatisfaction, and the correlation between the two is almost self-evident. To provide some historical context of social comparison from an individual consumer via marketing, it is important to analyze the timeline of body image ideals in modern-day media, starting with the dissemination of mass visual communication with the introduction of the television in post-war America.

Post-War America

In 1950, Marilyn Monroe was considered the standard of "voluptuous beauty." A major media icon, Monroe was published in print media such as Playboy, Family Circle, Yank Magazine, Colliers Magazine, LIFE, and Vogue. According to both popular claims and newspaper reports, Monroe was a size 12 during the 1950s. However, Helser notes that her interviews with a vintage clothing expert and a representative of the Art Institute of Phoenix show that "vanity sizing" practices have changed standard clothing size equivalencies over the past 55 years.[8] What was considered to be a size 12 in the 1950s would have actually been considered to be a size 6 in 2004. Although Monroe has been referenced as a size 12 by some researchers using today's standards of clothing sizes, official measurements show she was 5'6"

[8] Helser, L. "Vanity sizing alive, well." *The Arizona Republic.* January 14, 2004.

and her weight varied between 115 to 120 pounds. Her website also notes that her dressmaker claimed that her measurements were 35-22-35 (bust, waist, hips). Although Monroe may not have weighed as much as many researchers have posited, research shows that the societal standard for female body image has continued to decrease in size since 1959.

Exploring the transition from a curvy to a streamlined figure, along with the often-desperate strategies women sought to obtain these body ideals, highlights the persuasive power of cosmetic culture. With Marilyn Monroe's death in 1962, the societal, curvaceous ideal was left without its paradigm example. Additionally, it was also the end of Hollywood's influence on the female consumer's self-perception of her body. Due to censorship, early television aimed to present "unthreatening women," both in programming and advertisements.

1960s: The Introduction of the Thin Ideal

Fashion magazines like *Vogue, Harper's Bazaar*, and *Cosmopolitan* harbored a near-monopoly on style and beauty without Hollywood to contend with in the mid- to late-1960s. Part of the British Invasion that brought the Beatles, miniskirts, and panty hose to American shores also swept in Leslie Hornby – a 16 year-old-girl who stood 5 feet 6.5 inches, weighed 91 pounds, with 32-22-32 measurements. Better known as 'Twiggy,' the emaciated British teen played an important role in the "slenderization" of American feminine bodies. During this same time, between 1966 and 1970, the average American 16-year-old weighed 122.7 pounds and stood 5 feet 3 inches high.[9] Reports fluctuated on how much the scrawny model actually weighed, with claims ranging from 91 pounds at the lightest and 97 pounds at her heaviest.

[9] Cynthia Ogden, Cheryl D. Fryar, Margaret D. Carroll, and Katherine M. Flegal, "Mean Body Weight, Height, and Body Mass Index, United States 1960-2002," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Vital and Health Statistics No. 347, October 27, 2004.

"Twiggy is called Twiggy because she looks as though a strong gale would snap her in two and dash her to the ground," one fashion journalist remarked. "In a profession where thinness is essential, Twiggy is of such meager constitution that other models stare at her."[10] Twiggy represented not only extreme thinness, but also a free and modern body, rejecting the ideals of the immediate postwar world. Although U.S. men never adjusted to the super skinniness of the English model, Dixon et al. concur that Twiggy established a new standard for the average size of the fashion model in America, and started a trend towards slenderization that continues today.[11] With both Twiggy and fuller fashion figures – such as Farrah Fawcett and Cheryl Tiegs – as ideals, this introduced a double-standard paradox in the ideal feminine body.

Skinny high-fashion models even influenced men's magazines. Playboy Playmates became taller and skinnier in the late 1960s, with the photographic emphasis moving away from large breasts, accenting legs instead. Although the breast size of Playboy's centerfolds slightly shrank by the late 1960s, the most significant impact on Playmate models during America's "streamlining period" was weight, rather than their bust- to-waist-to-hip proportions. While the foldout Playmate between 1953 and 1964 on average weighed 116.7 pounds at just under 5 feet 5 and a half inches, the models featured in the latter half of the 1960s weighed a full 4 pounds less. In the late 1960s, Playmates were also younger than their 1950s counterparts, resulting in less-developed body proportions. Although the average age of Playboy centerfolds in the 1950s was 23 years, in the 1960s, the average age of the foldout model was only 20. Twiggy and many of her high-fashion counterparts were "discovered" when they were less than eighteen years old. This tradition has carried on today in high-fashion modeling; many of the most popular

[10] Polly Devlin, "Paris: Twiggy Haunt Couture," Vogue, March 1967, 64.
[11] Dixon, K., Kary, T., & Maccarone, D. (1999). *Body Icon*.

supermodels start their careers early in their teens when post-pubescent curves have not yet filled out their frames.

1980s: Becoming Aware of Eating Disorders

We can investigate popular representations of eating disorders and body dysmorphia by analyzing the media coverage of the two most famous women with eating disorders: Karen Carpenter and Princess Diana. During the 1980s, public consciousness of the mental disorder anorexia nervosa was raised, and it became a significant societal concern. This awareness was mainly facilitated by the death of singer Karen Carpenter, who suffered from anorexia nervosa and died from cardiac arrest in 1983. Speculations about Karen Carpenter's thinness and health had appeared in the press since 1975, when she collapsed on stage, but the fact that she had anorexia nervosa became widely known only after her death. Thus, the coverage of Carpenter and anorexia first peaked when she died in 1983, and again peaked in 1988 when the film *The Karen Carpenter Story* was released.

Similarly, Princess Diana's revelations about bulimia in the 1990s publicized the condition. Journalists had speculated about Princess Diana's eating disorder soon after the birth of Prince William in 1982, but the Princess's bulimia became widely known through Andrew Morton's sensationalist biography, published in 1992. The first major peak in the coverage of Princess Diana and bulimia was in 1995, when she gave her famous *Panorama* interview, in which she talked about her bulimia and unhappy marriage. The Princess's confession of bulimia became one of the key revelations of the interview, which some newspapers, such as the Labor-leaning *Guardian*, interpreted through the popular discourse of being a "survivor," such as

survivors of breast cancer or sexual abuse.[12] The discourse of surviving celebrates a victim's ability to turn her 'wounded' state into personal strength and political mission.

The media coverage of the two celebrities draws attention to, first, the fact that popular discourses on thinness and popular discourses on eating disorders are very similar, fomenting women's anxieties about not being strong and independent enough or not being adaptable and caring enough. The framing of anorexic women as simply sick or under false consciousness contributes to these women's sense that nobody understands them. The sentiment of not being understood also informs the so-called "pro-ana" websites, where anorexic women defend their right to starve as a "life style choice" and display "thinspirational" pictures of their starved bodies – this thesis will discuss thinspiration in further detail in a later section.

The analysis of news discourses about Karen Carpenter and Princess Diana draws attention to how not only media images of thinness but also media representations of eating disorders legitimate the same gendered structural contradictions that interlace women's problematic relationships with body, self, and achievement. Regardless of its progressive accents, the news discourse on Carpenter's anorexia basically invites women to annihilate their feminine self, found wanting in personal and political terms. It closely mimics the idealization of thinness and fitness with its references to masculine mastery and self-determination that inform anorexia in the first place. The media coverage of Princess Diana's life and bulimia resonates with the contemporary fascination with changing the body and self. This fuels women's quest to transform their bodies/selves, which leads to women's dissatisfaction with themselves, and sometimes eventually manifests in eating disorders.

[12] Saukko, Paula. "Rereading Media and Eating Disorders: Karen Carpenter, Princess Diana, and the Healthy Female Self." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Volume 23, 2006. Issue 2. pp. 152-169.

Fitness in the 1980s. An aside: According to Dixon et al., the focus on fitness and a toned body type continued to be an important aspect of the feminine physique in the 1980s.[13] They note the popularity of volumes such as Jane Fonda's *Workout Book* and Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* are examples of the perceived importance that was placed on fitness during the 1980s as well as the association that existed between being fit and achieving societal success. Although a fit, toned body type was in vogue, the societal standard for the ideal female body size was continuing to become thinner.[14] Dixon et al. note that during the 1980s the weight of the average model had fallen to 23 percent less than the weight of the average American woman.[15]

1990s: The Waif and Heroin Chic Ideal

The public representation of Kate Moss has become synonymous with the term "waif," a figure that emerged in the beginning of the 1990s. Additionally, a waif figure has become inextricably linked to the subsequent cultural obsession with thinness and proliferating images of differently styled thin bodies. This waif figure suggests a body on the brink of collapse, in various ways

Fashion media are one of the strongest transmitters of unrealistic body shape and appearance ideals, and have been consistently linked to widespread body image and weight concerns among women in western society. In 2017, the average American woman is 5'4" and weighs 140 pounds, while the average American model is 5'11" and weighs 117 pounds. Most high fashion models weigh an average of twenty-three percent less than this average, whereas

[13] Dixon, K., Kary, T., & Maccarone, D. (1999). Body icon.

[14] Myers, P. N., & Biocca, F. A. (1992). "The elastic body image: The effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women." *Journal of Communication*, 42, 108-133.

[15] Dixon, K., Kary, T., & Maccarone, D. (1999). Body icon.

twenty years ago, this difference was a mere eight percent. We see this fashion media disparity by analyzing Kate Moss and her role in high fashion marketing campaigns – most infamously, Calvin Klein and heroin chic.

The emergence of waif is most famously associated with the notorious Calvin Klein "heroin chic" campaign of 1995, which depicts a controversial fantasy scene that became associated with three interlinked cultural taboos: sexualization, drug abuse, and, most pertinent to the scope of this thesis, anorexia. It can be argued that the glorification of drug use and extreme thinness in the campaign is made to be responsible for negative body image within the consumer, which is, in turn, assumed to contribute to the development of anorexia through repeated exposure, consumer awareness, and message internalization.

CHAPTER THREE

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND ADVERTISING

Conceptual Framework of the Consumer Decision Journey

The consumer decision journey provides structure and helps us understand how this body ideal created by traditional marketing can affect the consumer. To debrief on some terminology that will be used throughout the course of this thesis, and to provide context for the reader on theories and measurements in an otherwise qualitative field, the following will discuss metrics and theories used which will help navigate this discussion surrounding marketing exposure and body image. To understand how body image concerns may manifest through advertisement exposure, it is important to learn the consumer behavior concepts of problem recognition and the ideal state.

Problem Recognition

When assessing a product, the problem recognition state is the first of the five steps consumers take in the decision process. This recognition is a psychological process through which a consumer evaluates the difference between our actual state and our desired state in relation to a product. A comparison of one's current situation versus where an individual would like to be occurs. The greater the perceived distance between the actual and ideal, the more clearly the consumer recognizes a problem, and a potential need for the product.[16] Additionally, the larger the discrepancy, the higher the level of motivation, ability, and opportunity, known as (MAO), and the more likely consumers are to act – whether that constitutes actually buying the

[16] M. Joseph Sirgy, Don R. Rahtz, Laura Portolese Dias. "Consumer Behavior Today." *Flat World Education*. 2016.

product, or whether it manifests in other form of "acting," such as eating disorder-related behavior.

According to communications theories – discussed in detail later in this section, repeated exposure to media content leads viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality. In this case, it is believed that the media's consistent depiction of a thin ideal leads women to see this ideal as normative, expected, and central to attractiveness. However, because media presentations of women's bodies are so skewed, showcasing an ideal that is out of reach to most, adopting this reality may lead to decreased satisfaction with one's own body and to behaviors aimed at meeting this ideal, behaviors such as dieting, bingeing and purging, and skipping meals.[17] Note the emphasis on the word "perceived" in this context, as this is important in understanding a consumer's body dissatisfaction that usually arises out of a "perceived" difference in their actual versus ideal state, which will be discussed later, usually an inflation or not consistent with reality.

In the analysis of late 20th century marketing campaigns, it is evident that many of the advertisements were geared toward pointing out to women what is wrong or what needs to be corrected in their bodies, rather than encouraging and celebrating the diversity of shape. The core of body image dissatisfaction has been located within a discrepancy between the perceived self and ideal self. The ideal self-image may be considered as either an "internal ideal" or a "societal ideal," resulting from the rules of the surrounding cultural and societal environment as to what constitutes the perfect body.

[17] Levine, M. P., & Harrison, K. (2004). The role of mass media in the perpetuation and prevention of negative body image and disordered eating. In J. K. Thompson (Ed.), Handbook of eating disorders and obesity (pp. 695-717). New York: Wiley

The Ideal State

Ideal states, the way consumers would like a situation to be, is again stimulated by this self-image and perception. Ideal states change across culture, time-period, geographic location, and social group.[18] It is an ever-changing idea. This concept also manifests itself in societal expectations of what the ideal female body should look like. Even focusing exclusively in the latter half of the 20th century with American popular culture, the ideal female body changes drastically across decades. There has not been a constant, immutable image of the desirable female body throughout history. The past fifty years have especially observed a revolutionary mutation of the ideal figure. By analyzing pivotal points in the landscape of female body image in different eras, and the transformation of modern media in advertising, it is evident that there have been dramatic changes in what is considered a beautiful body.

While exposure to media images of the body-perfect ideal has been partly blamed for the pursuit of thinness among women and muscularity among men, research has largely overlooked the materialistic messages often associated with these images. In advertising, for example, unrealistically attractive people are seen to experience happiness, love or success while using the material goods being advertised. Not only is a thin body portrayed as the ideal, but also as an integral part of an ideal life. Media and advertising manage to create a seamless association between people with the 'right' appearance and the 'right' material goods. By doing so, these

[18] Wayne D. Hoyer, Deborah J. MacInnis, and Rik Pieters. *Consumer Behavior*. Southwestern Cengage Learning. Sixth Edition. 2013.

media images may, therefore, simultaneously imprint materialistic values and make people feel worse about their appearance.[19]

Regarding body image, there is a challenge the consumer faces in trying to be "normal" (typically within the paradigm of tall and thin). American society has created in a community where only celebrities are cherished and revered, and their bodies are put up as examples of how we all should look."[20]

Not only does the consumer feel compelled to consistently keep up with this ever-changing ideal state, but in present day, advertisers have begun to construct a false, unattainable ideal state that emphasizes perfection. In her *Killing Us Softly* series, Dr. Jean Kilbourne takes a fresh look at how advertising traffics in distorted and destructive ideals of femininity. Kilbourne comments on the culture of advertising telling female consumers that what's most important is how they look, and ads surround us with the image of the ideal feminine body. This flawless ideal, however, cannot be achieved. It is an image that has been created and highly curated through airbrushing, cosmetics, and computer retouching.

In Howell's thesis *Peek-A-Boo*, the media researcher notes how there is an illusion of perfection that inundates the media and supplies women of all races, cultures, and backgrounds with the ideology that a "perfect [body] is not only attainable, but the ideal to be pursued."[21] Dittrich, *Above-Face* director, (2004) attempts to develop positive self-images in females

---

[19] Unnur Guðnadóttir, Ragna B. Garðarsdóttir. "The Influence of Materialism and Ideal Body Internalization on Body-Dissatisfaction and Body-Shaping Behaviors of Young Men and Women: Support for the Consumer Culture Impact Model." *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 55, Issue 2. 151- 159. April 2014.

[20] Jean Kilbourne. *Killing Us Softly 4*. 2011.

[21] Kimberly L Howell. "Peek-A-Boo! I See You: Capturing the Story and Image of Invisible Beauty in Los Angeles." *Pacifica Graduate Institute Philosophy Dissertation.* 2014.

through media education, outreach, and activism.[22] Dittrich supports the suggestion that the media have an adverse effect on women's perceptions of their bodies. She notes that the media perpetuate the perception in Western cultures that thinness is a means to attaining social acceptance, happiness, love, and personal and business achievements. According to Dittrich, unrealistic media images of thinness also present ideals that appear to be achievable to the average woman, and that these images promote the misconception that the thin female body size represents the standard body weight that women should try to emulate.

The Actual State

A variety of factors can influence a consumer's actual state. This includes simple physical factors, needs, and external stimuli. External stimuli can suddenly change an individual's perceived notion of their actual state. Using external stimuli, marketing acts as a catalyst in helping put consumers in a state of problem recognition and motivating them to start the decision process. Additionally, marketers can attempt to encourage a consumer's dissatisfaction with the actual state. It is important to note that similar to a consumer's perception of the ideal state, a perception of the actual state can again not be indicative of reality.

The Consumer Journey

The cultural standard of beauty, regarding body shape, is promulgated, to a significant degree, via the major mass media. The relationship advertising and body dysmorphia can be divided into three steps: exposure, awareness, and internalization – discussed in the following sections. Body ideals are established by society and marketing through exposure, which the consumer eventually becomes aware of and internalizes into their own perception of their body

[22] Dittrich, L. (2004). Above-Face facts on the media. Retrieved March 11, 2017.

image. Whereas body ideals occur on a societal level, body image is a much more individual concept that varies from consumer to consumer.

Exposure

According to Kilbourne, the average American is exposed to over 3000 ads every day and will spend two years of his or her life watching television commercials.[23] This consistent exposure is subject to shape especially impressionable young females during their formative years. Repeated exposure to media content leads viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality.[24] In this case, it is believed that the media's consistent depiction of a thin ideal leads women to see this ideal as normative, expected, and central to attractiveness. However, because media presentations of women's bodies are so skewed, highlighting an ideal that is out of reach to most, adopting this reality may lead to decreased satisfaction with one's own body, and to behaviors aimed at meeting this ideal, behaviors such as dieting, bingeing and purging, and skipping meals. Grabe, Ward, and Hyde's study in *Psychological Bulletin* found that media exposure appears to be related to women's body image negatively regardless of assessment technique, individual difference variables, media type, age, or other idiosyncratic study characteristics.[25]

Cultivation theory. Some negative attributes of exposure can be explained through cultivation and exposure frequency theory. Cultivation theory, although first used to study

[23] Amy Roeder. "Advertising's Toxic Effects on Eating and Body Image." *Harvard Public Health News*. March 18, 2015.

[24] Shelly Grabe and L. Monique War. "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies." *Psychological Bulletin*. Vol. 134, No. 3, 460-476. 2008.

[25] Ibid.

television, looks at cumulative content and the frequency of the messages being disseminated throughout various media forms. Relying on an additive type model of social influence, cultivation theory helps researchers conclude that more exposure leads to the greater the risk of harm for the development of body dysmorphia. George Gerbner (1998) defined cultivation as "the independent contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality."[26] Cultivation suggests that media effects build over time through frequent, repetitive viewing. That is, heavy television viewers were more likely to perceive the real world in accordance with what they had viewed on the television.

Another element of cultivation theory that must be addressed is that of resonance. Resonance is defined as "the notion that viewers' life experiences affect their perceptions of television."[27] If the viewers' life experiences are similar to the media content that they are viewing, the media messages are more likely to influence them. The authors suggest that direct experiences that are corroborated on television also combine in the viewers' minds, making it more difficult for them to recall whether the notions stemmed from direct or mediated experience. Additionally, the combination of the experiences makes the content more accessible. If a viewer directly observes a negative connotation with being overweight and also observes this situation on television, resonance may cause the connotation to be more readily retrieved during judgments regarding weight and shape.[28] It also corroborates existing attitudes – such as the idea that thinness is a necessary attribute in order to achieve success and social desirability. This may

---

[26] Gerbner, G. (1998). Cultivation analysis: An overview. Mass Communication & Society, 1(3/4), 175.

[27] Shrum, L.J., & Bischak, V. D. (2001). Mainstreaming, resonance, and impersonal impact: Testing moderators of the cultivation effect for estimates of crime risk. Human Communication Research, 27(2), 187-215.

[28] Van Vonderen, Kristen & Kinnally, William. "Media Effects on Body Image: Examining Media Exposure in the Broader Context of Internal and Other Social Factors." *American Communication Journal*. 2012 Spring (Volume 14, Issue 2). pp. 41 – 58.

result in peers who are heavy viewers of thin-ideal media sharing similar attitudes regarding weight and body shape, especially if their media consumption reinforces existing attitudes regarding thinness. Resonance may then tie internalization of the thin-ideal into social cognitive theory, which will be discussed in further detail in the next section of this thesis.

Exposure frequency theory. Exposure frequency theory helps further explain the negative effects of exposure. When a consumer is exposed to a completely new situation that they were not initially positively inclined to, they become more familiar to that item or situation. After three or more familiarities to the matter, the consumer may become more receptive to making a purchase decision. Regarding body image exposure, exposure frequency theory may be able to help explain why a certain body type that is repeatedly exposed through marketing and media outlets could become a new societal ideal, also known as the creation of somatoforms – a structural archetype of an achieved look that is learned through social messaging.

As consumers and marketing continue to move toward a more digital space, exposure frequency theory becomes increasingly relevant. Increased exposure due to technological advances can result in an increased familiarity with a certain body ideal. The following sections will discuss how awareness and internalization of these types of messages can manifest in body image problems.

Awareness

Uses and gratification theory. Although exposure plays a large role in shaping societal standards of the ideal body, all the responsibility cannot be placed within institutional and societal practices, as consumers themselves can also have an active role in recognizing content. Uses and gratification theory, applied in later chapters of this thesis, looks at role of individuals -

how they choose to expose themselves to the messages being conveyed through the media and how they act upon their chosen interpretation. As seen in later chapters regarding social media and consumers curating the type of content they wish to see and engage in, uses and gratification theory helps us understand how dissatisfaction incites dissatisfaction.

Social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory states that people learn through observation, and modify their behavior accordingly to obtain desired outcomes. Social cognitive theory posits there are three interrelated factors that influence human behavior: personal, behavioral, and environmental.[29] These three determinates play a role in how people perceive reality. This thesis focuses on the third factor, environment, and how it plays a role in a consumer's perception of reality.

This theory suggests that perceptions of reality are dependent on what people have learned through their own experiences or through vicarious observations of the behaviors of others. For these experiences and observations to have a motivational effect on the observer, the observer must be consciously aware of the modeled action and the consequences that can be expected if they model that action. Furthermore, the observer must internalize and retain the modeled action as well as attempt to personally replicate the model's behavior. Motivation to continue the specific behavior is based on the positive or negative consequences that the observer experiences after they replicate the modeled action.[30] Consequently, the thin female social models, who are depicted as socially successful, in women's magazines may be internalized by some women as the standard for femininity. Furthermore, this information may be retained as the ideal, female body standard that will bring positive societal outcomes; therefore, some women are motivated to imitate these thin social models to attain the perceived positive social results.

[29] Bandura, A. (2001). "Social cognitive theory of mass communication." *Media Psychology*, 3(3), 265-299.
[30] Ibid.

Therefore, based on the literature, thin female body images in women's magazines may be perceived as role models by women. These thin female body images are often depicted as being recipients of positive societal outcomes.[31] Media figures and peers serve as references for body image standards that are also likely to connect in some way to eating or exercising behavior. The social cognitive theory explains why some women desire to emulate the observed positive outcomes that serve as a stimulus for pursuing patterns of behavior that appear to facilitate societal success.[32] Women observe thin female body images and internalize them as the societal standard for feminine success; therefore, these media images may have an influence on some women's future behaviors. The literature supports a relationship between mass media consumption and a woman's development of body perception. The literature and the social cognitive theory further support a relationship between women's self-perceptions and their perceived needs to imitate societal standards that are presented through photographic representations of celebrities and models that are published in the media.

Internalization

All the above theories have pointed out the importance of not only looking at the volume and content of the messages being conveyed, but also how these messages are assimilated through a diverse population of women. Disordered eating and obsession with food is a widely-accepted way to deal with weight and body image issues. It is largely considered normative behavior for women, and remains largely unproblematized or altogether ignored by a clinical perspective. These patterns of behavior are referred to as “culturally induced eating”—a pattern

[31] Garner, D., Olmstead, M., & Polivy, J. (1983). Development and validation of a multidimensional eating disorder inventory for anorexia nervosa and bulimia. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 2(2), 15-34.

[32] Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology*, 3(3), 265-299.

of behavioral eating–disordered symptoms in individuals that do not manifest the psychological symptoms usually associated with clinical eating disorders; a pattern of behaviors that directly stems from the socio-economic and cultural context within which women's lives are embedded.

Internalization refers to a cognitive endorsement of the cultural ideal of attractiveness. It involves affirming the desirability of socially defined ideals and engaging in behaviors to achieve those ideals.[33] Because the current ideal body for women involves extreme thinness, most studies of internalization have focused on the thin ideal and substantial evidence indicates that thin-ideal internalization is a risk factor for eating and shape-related disturbances. Thin-ideal internalization is thought to directly promote body dissatisfaction (because the cultural ideal is unattainable for most women) and dieting (as a means of achieving a slender body).

Internalization of media messages plays a central role as a problematic dispositional feature that may help explain why the media disproportionately affects some individuals. The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ), developed in 1995, helps explain the consumer decision journey. SATAQ contains two scales: internalization (endorsement or acceptance of media and societally based pressures regarding appearance) and awareness (acknowledgement that such pressures exist).[34] In a series of studies, it is shown that internalization is a significant correlate of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance and

[33] Heinberg, L. J., Thompson, J., & Stormer, S. (1995). Development and validation of the sociocultural attitudes towards appearance questionnaire. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 17(1), 81-89.

[34] Ibid.

predicts variance beyond that associated with simple awareness of pressures and other risk factors, such as negative feedback (teasing) about appearance.[35]

Implications of Consumer Behavior on Body Image

The Introduction of Television: A Fijian Case Study

Analyzing Fiji's introduction of television in 1995 helps us further understand the impact exposure can have on catalyzing a negative body image among female consumers, and the implication of the consumer decision journey. The global diffusion of ultra-thin images of women seems to have left an imprint on other ethnic groups, as thinness ideals can be found across the world. In her anthropological study, *Body, Self, and Society: The View from Fiji*, Dr. Anne Becker performed a case study on the introduction of television to the island of Fiji in 1995. Previously, Fijians had no consistent visual comparison for the outside world's standards of beauty, and created an ideal that aligned with their own cultural values. The prevalence of eating disorders and other body image-related concerns was non-existent. After the introduction of television and visual-based advertising to the island, however, there was a remarkable shift in Fijian women's perceived actual state, and a new ideal state of comparison for beauty.

The centrality of food, in part, is a cultural artifact of a traditional economy based on the shifting fortunes of subsistence agriculture. Who knew when the next run of fish would come, or how good the crops would be? Prosperity has traditionally been associated with food, and with hefty figures. In women especially, Fijians "appreciate large, robust bodies," said Becker. But that ideal body type is now on a collision course with the Western ideal that equates beauty with

[35] Van Vonderen, Kristen E. & Kinnally, William. "Media Effects on Body Image: Examining Media Exposure in the Broader Context of Internal and Other Social Factors." *American Communication Journal*. 2012 Spring. Vol. 4. Issue 2. pp. 41-58.

thinness. This clash of cultures has affected adolescent girls most deeply, she said, and has engendered mental health implications.

Becker oversaw a 1995-98 study that measured the effect of television on cultural norms. Television was only catching on in Fiji in 1995. A decade before, even electricity was rare.[36] The results were startling. In 1995, without television, girls in Fiji appeared to be free of the eating disorders common in the West. But by 1998, after just a few years of sexy soap operas and seductive commercials, 11.3 percent of adolescent girls reported they at least once had purged to lose weight.

To illustrate this rapid transformation of ideals, Becker quoted from the 1998 interviews. "I want their body," said one girl of the Western shows she watched. "I want their size." This example strengthens the argument that women may associate a better life with a thin ideal body when viewing thin-ideal imagery in the media.[37]

By the glow of television, young girls in Fiji "got the idea they could re-sculpt their lives," said Becker — but they also began to "think of themselves as poor and fat," an example of how television marketing can influence dissatisfaction with one's actual state. The changing social environment also took its toll on mental health. In 2007, Becker started a school-based study within one wedge-shaped section of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island. More than 520 girls filled out questionnaires, and 300 consented to interviews.

Becker found that disordered eating habits were "alive and well in Fiji," with 45 percent of girls reporting they had purged in the last month. (In some cases, they got traditional herbal purgatives from their mothers.) Ironically, the same girls sometimes used appetite stimulants, she

[36] Lincoln, Rose. "Fijian girls succumb to Western dysmorphia." *Harvard Gazette*. March 19, 2009.
[37] Ibid.

found. They feared what in Fijian is called *macake*, a disorder that suppresses the appetite — inviting the thinness disparaged by traditional culture.[38] Becker's study also revealed a dissonance between the reality of the girls' lives (poor and agrarian) and their expectations (rich and cosmopolitan).[39]

Generally, body image refers to a person's perceptions, feelings, or attitudes about his or her body or physical appearance. The term ''body image'' has many definitions, such as body satisfaction, appearance evaluation, appearance orientation, body schema, body esteem, body boundary aberration, or body image disturbance, depending on which of its different multidimensional aspects are highlighted. Body satisfaction is defined as the ''degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various parts or processes of the body."[40] Stemming from ''the degree of discrepancy or congruence between self-perceived physical characteristics and personally valued appearance ideals,'' body satisfaction conveys positive to negative self-appraisals of one's appearance.[41] Again, this relates back to the difference between one's ideal state and one's perceived actual state in consumer behavior and the decision-making process.

People experience social comparisons either consciously or unconsciously with thin-idealized media images. Comparisons with idealized female body images, typically highly thin and attractive, can lead to anxiety about the self or social evaluations. In more extreme cases, negative body image or body dissatisfaction might result in dysfunctions and disorders, such as

---

[38] Ibid.

[39] Corydon Ireland. "Fijian girls succumb to Western dysmorphia" *Harvard Gazette*. March 19, 2009.

[40] Yu, U.J. "Deconstructing College Students' Perceptions of Thin-Idealized Versus Non-Idealized Media Images on Body Dissatisfaction and Advertising Effectiveness," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. Vol. 32(2) 153 – 169. 2014.

[41] Ibid.

eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder. The pervasiveness of thin ideals in media generally results in negative body images—such as body dissatisfaction, body anxiety, depression, or poor self-esteem.

Most aspects of consumer behavior are culture bound, and this includes body dissatisfaction among individuals and societies. In fact, dissatisfaction with body weight and shape is so widespread among women that it has long been recognized as a "normative discontent."[42] When analyzing the correlates and predictors of the development of body image-related problems, the *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* labels one correlate as the "restraint" pathway, which involves internalization of societal ideals about beauty and thinness.[43] This then leads to dieting behavior in response to the discrepancy between the individual's actual body shape and the ideal body shape promoted by society. Binge eating and purging can also occur due to the biological and affective consequences of restrictive dieting. In terms of the role of social influences, exposure to thin media images has been repeatedly mentioned as playing a key role in the development of disordered eating and body image dissatisfaction. Media images may be damaging to those with body image-related problems because they seek out such media, internalize the messages presented, and then use the media as a source for information on how to improve this appearance.

Barbie: Promoting a Thin Ideal to Young Consumers

[42] Silbia Knobloch-Westerwick and Josselyn Crane. "A Losing Battle: Effects of Prolonged Exposure to Thing-Ideal Images on Dieting and Body Satisfaction." *Communication Research.* 39(1) 79-102. 2012.

[43] Heather L. Littleton and Thomas Ollendick. "Negative Body Image and Disordered Eating Behavior in Children and Adolescents: What Places Youth at Risk and How Can These Problems Be Prevented?" *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2003.

Barbie has been the global symbol of a certain type of somatoform – a tall, skinny body – for the past half-century. This icon is an example of how thin-ideal imagery is embedded in the female consumer at a young age. Barbie has courted controversy since her birth. Her creator, Ruth Handler, based Barbie's body on a German prostitute gag gift doll that was traditionally handed out at bachelor parties. As much as Mattel, the company that owns Barbie, has tried to market her as a feminist, Barbie's famous figure has always overshadowed her business outfits and various career roles. At her core, she is just a body, not a character, a canvas upon which society can project its anxieties about body image. Her status as an empowered woman has been lost. Furthermore, several body positivity campaigns have brought to light the anatomical impossibility of Barbie – over six feet and unable to walk on her own.

Social Comparison Theory

According to Festinger's social comparison theory, people seek to satisfy their need for self-evaluation through the use of social standards – by comparing themselves with other people.[44] Body dissatisfaction has been connected to media consumption in that media are often identified as sources women turn to for information about their physical appearance, and thin models and actresses are ostensibly the standard in current media. Social comparison theory has been used to examine the association between media consumption and body dissatisfaction.

For women, models of physical comparison are most often found in images projected by the media. A female consumer comparing herself to a model who is curated to appear attractive is likely to produce a low evaluation of her own attractiveness, her "actual state." In Western

[44] Irving, Lori M. "Mirror Images: Effects of the Standard of Beauty on the Self- and Body-Esteem of Women Exhibiting Varying Levels of Bulimic Symptoms." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1990.

psychology, the body is viewed as part of the identity. Body esteem is related to self-esteem, and people attribute more desirable characteristics to physically attractive persons. The clear majority of research on what constitutes physical attractiveness has been conducted in Western societies, but mostly in the United States, where physical attractiveness of women is judged according to strict criteria. The general idea is that a desirable appearance leads to greater self-esteem.[45]

Festinger's original theory dealt with comparisons within groups and face-to-face interactions, but it has since been recognized that individuals also compare themselves to larger social categories, such as models in advertisements.[46] Social comparison theory argues that women evaluate their own appearance by comparing themselves with the cultural ideals of beauty and thinness presented in the media. Almost invariably this will be an upward comparison by which women fall short, resulting in dissatisfaction with their own appearance and body. This reasoning is supported by experimental evidence that the observed negative effect of media exposure on body dissatisfaction is at least partially mediated by engaging in social comparison while viewing thin ideal images.[47]

However, as we move towards a more digital space, these lines become blurred. The structure that consumer behavior gives to traditional marketing no longer becomes directly applicable to the Internet and social media, and society continues to move away from "formal"

[45] Marieke de Mooij and Geert Hofstede. "Cross-Cultural Consumer Behavior: A Review of Research Findings." *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*. 23: 181-192. 2011.

[46] Silbia Knobloch-Westerwick and Josselyn Crane. "A Losing Battle: Effects of Prolonged Exposure to Thing-Ideal Images on Dieting and Body Satisfaction." *Communication Research.* 39(1) 79-102. 2012.

[47] Tiggemann, Marika. "Exercise to be fit, not skinny: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image." *Body Image Journal*. Volume 15. September 2015. pp. 61 – 67.

traditional marketing. The next chapter will discuss what this means for female body image and how we can apply these consumer behavior theories to the Internet and social media.

CHAPTER FOUR

BODY IMAGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Internet Dissemination and Social Media

With technological advances, communication has become increasingly faster. Additionally, formal traditional marketing has declined in favor of more targeted, more curated content in the digital space. With this, we first see consumers being exposed to more content, more frequently. Second, the lines between consumer and marketer have become blurred as the consumer has now become the content creator – especially in social media and influencer marketing. This is a stray away from the formal definition of traditional marketing, with less regulation and tracking in this space. Third, consumers and users are now able to curate the type of content they like to see through social media, which is especially dangerous when looking at consumers who internalize body dissatisfaction, as they are now able to continue accessing content that confirms they belief of a thin-ideal

The Internet is a relatively new element of media that has been linked to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating symptomatology, especially in women. Internet and social media exposure have been found to be significantly related to the internalization of thin ideals, weight dissatisfaction, and appearance comparison.[48] Given the internet's pervasiveness, determining what aspects of internet exposure contribute to body image and eating issues is necessary.

As discussed earlier, the majority of experimental research in the body-image social comparison literature has investigated the influence of exposure to idealized bodies and imagery

[48] Boepple, Leah and Thompson, J. Kevin. "A content analytic comparison of fitspiration and thinspiration websites." *International Journal of Eating Disorders.* Volume 49, Issue 1. January 2016. pp. 98 – 101.

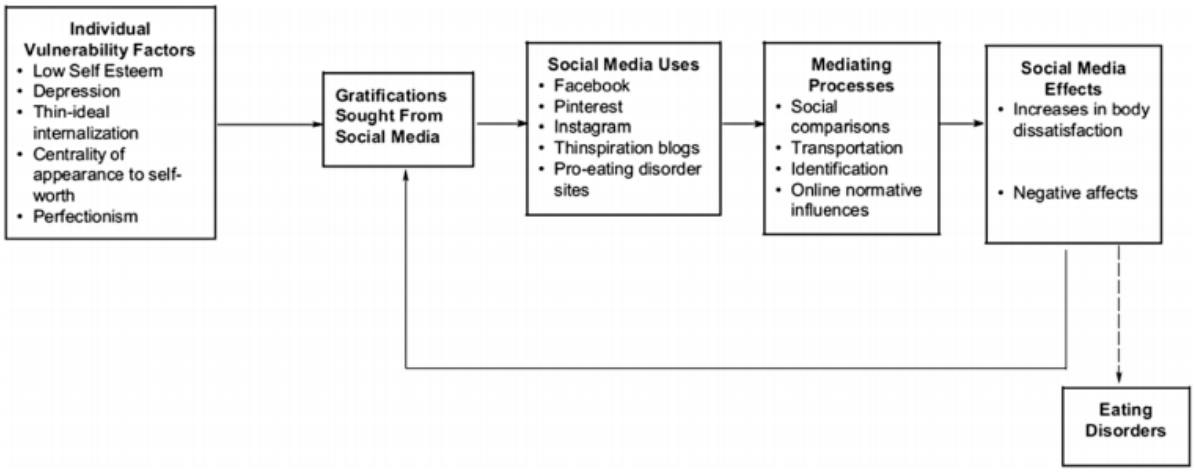
only in terms of traditional media such as magazines, television, advertising, etc.[49] More recent research suggests that the popularity of these media types is being overtaken by the popularity and availability of more interactive media such as the Internet, particularly among adolescents.[50] Little published research to date, however, has examined whether and how social media use, specifically, may influence perceptions of physical ideals and how best to attain those. Yet given the heavy online presence of young adults, particularly women, and their reliance on social media, it is important to appreciate ways that social media can influence perceptions of body image and body dysmorphia.

Research on U.S.A. traditional media imagery on girls and young women has supported its influence on body dissatisfaction, in part because the images of a physical ideal tend to reinforce each other in their consistency across a generation. Therefore, ascribing some amount of influence on young women's body image to social media must operate on two assumptions: first, that (at least some) youth are using social media to seek information about body image, as in thinspiration or pro-eating disorder websites or Pinterest groups; and second, that images posted on social media sites may be as influential as those found in traditional television or magazine content, which implies a similar degree of homogeneity among social media images. If these assumptions are unmet, social media may still have an important influence on body image, but that influence could be quite different than that of traditional media.

Applying Uses-and-Gratification Theory to Social Media

[49] Andsager, Julie. "Research Directions in Social Media and Body Image." *Sex Roles*. December 2014. Volume 71. Issue 11.

The uses-and-gratification approach to studying an individual's selection in the media is a consumer behavior method used to understand why people choose one media message over another. Individuals use various forms of media for information, diversion, and social utility. The uses-and-gratifications approach is based on assumptions about a consumer's psychological traits, their motivations for selecting certain types of messages, and their level of involvement with the medium and/or message. According to this approach, consumers are inherently active, identifying their needs, then choosing the media/message or other communication they expect will gratify those needs.



[51]**Fig. 1** Perloff's transactional model of social media and body image concerns

Perloff's transactional model of social media and body image concerns. Perloff's implicit assumption that young women actively seek information on body idealism via social media should certainly seem to apply to those who share the individual vulnerability factors listed as personality traits in the transactional model (shown in Figure 1 above) of social media

[51] Perloff, Richard M. "Social Media Effects on Young Women's Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research." *Feminist Forum Review Article: Sex Roles*. pp. 1 – 15.

and body image concerns.[52] As Perloff noted, individuals with low self-esteem and those who strive for perfection may be especially influenced by media images of a thin ideal. These vulnerability factors have been identified by in previous research as predictors of body image concerns and body dysmorphia among U.S. females.[53] The question then turns to the extent to which body image dissatisfaction may be made more salient among young women who are not seeking such information (whether or not they are afflicted by individual vulnerability factors) but are unintentionally exposed to it.

This brings us to the second assumption regarding the influence of social media on young women's body dissatisfaction – that these images are as influential as media images can be. One factor that traditional media has consistently associated with female body dissatisfaction is the homogeneity of the media's depiction of the female body, emphasizing the thin ideal. The myriad individual, independent media producers who disseminate their messages on social media, have an opportunity to potentially challenge traditional media stereotypes of gender and idealized bodies propagated by the mass media and the advertising industry that supports them. Social media users have the chance to view amateur and independently produced content that might not be disseminated through corporate or publicly funded media. Social media may provide alternatives to the thin ideal, but they are not likely to overshadow its ubiquity in traditional media.

Uses and gratifications, therefore, is an appropriate approach to understanding how young women who possess vulnerability factors may employ social media to reinforce their internalization of the thin ideal. Vulnerable young women are likely to seek information about

[52] Perloff, Richard M. "Social Media Effects on Young Women's Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research." *Sex Roles*. 29 May 2014.
[53] Ibid.

body image on social media in similar ways as they do in traditional magazines. They are unlikely to seek materials that attempt to defy the notion that beauty is limited to the extremely thin, the young, and (mostly) the White.

Women's bodies have long been the subject of scrutiny, but anorexia nervosa and other disordered eating behaviors emerged as one of the most prominent health problems of the 1980s for girls and young women – to a point where it has been referred to as "communicable". It was – and still is – appropriate that girls and young women have been the focus of research on the media's role in shaping body image and possibly contributing to disordered eating behaviors.

There can be little doubt that sociocultural pressures on appearance are greater for women than for men, as we are bombarded with messages insisting that the female body is desperately in need of control to be socially and aesthetically acceptable. Indeed, one U.S. study found that while the media were most influential in both women's and men's striving for thinness, the second greatest predictor for women was social pressure. With the development of technology, social media can arguably fall under this category of both traditional media and social pressure.

Applying Social Comparison Theory to Social Media

Another consumer behavior lens in which we can analyze the sociocultural effects of social media is social comparison theory. There are several reasons that social comparison may be particularly pertinent to social networking sites. First, the speed and ease with which individuals can connect to their peers gives rise to the opportunity for ready and multiple comparisons. Further, these comparisons are likely to be made with at least somewhat idealized images, in that users generally post highly selective content, and even these can be digitally

altered. Instagram, for example, offers the selection of several possible filters to enhance the appearance of the photo.

Second, according to social comparison theory, which will be discussed in detail later in this thesis, drive for self-evaluation causes people to seek out comparisons with others who are similar rather than dissimilar to themselves. Therefore, peers provide more important appearance-comparison targets than models or celebrities.[54] In support, Cash et. al. found that women exposed to photos of attractive peers had lower self-ratings of attractiveness than women exposed to the same photos presented as professional models.[55] Third, social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram allow users to "like" and make comments on the photos. Therefore, social networking sites may provide a pervasive and intense form of "appearance conversations" that have been shown to be associated with poorer body image.[56]

A key feature that distinguishes contemporary social media technologies from conventional mass media is interactivity. Users are sources, as well as receivers. Social networking sites are available 24/7 for both viewing and content-creating, allowing for exponentially more opportunities for social comparison and dysfunctional surveillance of images than were available before with solely conventional traditional marketing.

Internet "Inspiration"

[54] Thompson, K., & Heinberg, Leslie J. (1999). The Media's Influence on Body Image Disturbance and Eating Disorders: We've Reviled Them, Now Can We Rehabilitate Them? *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(2), 338 – 353.

[55] Cash, Thomas F. et. al. "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Contrast Effects and Self Evaluations of Physical Attractiveness." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. September 1, 1983.

[56] Tiggemann, Marika. "Exercise to be fit, not skinny: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image." *Body Image Journal*. Volume 15. September 2015. pp. 61 – 67.

The spread of pro-eating disorder websites and social media content has become a public health concern over the last decade, and the focus of increasing research intention. While eating disorders are severe mental health illnesses, pro-eating disorder websites advocate for these disorders to be considered as a legitimate lifestyle choice rather than a mental health disorder.[57] The proliferation of thin-ideal imagery across social media has been categorized into two crowdsourced Internet-based movements: thinspiration and fitspiration – also known as and hereinafter referred to as thinspo and fitspo, respectively – both of which have received significant media attention in recent years.

Thinspiration

Thinspiration is thin-ideal media content (i.e., images and/or prose) that intentionally promotes weight loss and motivating conformity to a thin-ideal, often in a manner that encourages or glorifies dangerous behaviors characteristic of eating disorders. These images are created, posted, shared, and often searched with the goal of promoting thinness. Occasionally referred to as "pro-ana" or "pro-mia," – short for anorexia and bulimia, respectively, in extreme cases this content sometimes explicitly promotes eating disorders, or does so under a thin guise. Such content is frequently accompanied by explicit encouragement or advice on losing weight and staying thin. Although content specifically labeled as *thinspiration* has traditionally been found on pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) websites that encourage or advocate disordered eating for weight loss and image management, it is now widely shared and endorsed on popular social media websites without regulation.[58]

[57] Rodgers, Rachel et. Al. "A Meta-Analysis Examining the Influence of Pro-Eating Disorder Websites on Body Image and Eating Pathology." *European Eating Disorder Review*. 31 July 2015.

[58] Ghaznavi, J. and Taylor, Laramie D. "Bones, body parts, and sex appeal: An analysis of thinspiration images of popular social media." *Body Image*. June 2015. Volume 15. pp. 54-61.

This new form of Internet and social media content is a new, evolved issue of body image concern that have been catalyzed by the emergence of technology. Instead of companies using models that embody an unrealistic ideal state to promote a product, a more active consumer/user has dissected the thin-ideal aspiration. This new content has trickled down and disseminated throughout the digital space, where the product and profit motivation have been removed from the marketing, and instead, the weight loss agenda comes to the forefront. Although a specific product is not being sold here, the usually subvert body image message is, further studies are an important step in recognizing a potentially harmful media source and exploring the potentially negative impact of thinspo and fitspo-related content.

The sadly iconic Kate Moss aphorism— "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels"— exemplifies the electronic world of the pro-ana sites. Content analyses have revealed that these pro-eating disorder websites general include thin-ideal, emaciated images, as well as 'tips' in the form of extreme weight-loss behaviors, or suggestions of how to conceal symptoms from family members. Several studies that analyze the imagery content on thinspo tagged photos have shown that nearly half the images featured headless bodies of women and predominantly focused on the pelvis, abdomen, or thighs, a very objectifying theme that also tends to be sexually suggestive.[59] Brumberg noted that "a sizeable number of our young women -- poor and privileged alike -- regard their body as the best vehicle for making a statement about their identity and personal dreams." [60]

Objectification theory applied to "thinspiration" content. Objectification theory – defined as the conceptualization of an individual as an object, generally for the use and pleasure of

---

[59] Ibid.
[60] Brumberg, J. J. (2000*). Fasting girls: The history of anorexia nervosa.* New York: Vintage Books.

another individual – helps us understand why this can become an issue to an unassuming viewer. When individuals, are socialized to internalize an observer's perspective as the primary view of their physical selves, they also begin to think of themselves as objects to be looked at; a phenomenon known as self-objectification. When referring to girls and women, this observer perspective and primary focus has been coined as "the male gaze."

Exposure to objectified images portraying the thin ideal has been shown to increase self-objectification, weight-related appearance anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating Additional mental health risks associated with self-objectification include depression, body shame, and appearance anxiety. Ghaznavi's (2015) analysis concluded that if we – as viewers – are exposed to images where just a body part is featured, and those images are also sexualized, we begin to think about ourselves as just an instrument intended to expressly serve the purpose of others.[61]

Both objectification and social cognitive theory – the latter will be discussed later in this thesis – offer insight into how exposure to and interaction with these images, particularly in a social context such as social media, may result in negative outcomes for viewers. Additionally, most studies conducted in this relatively new content movement have been experimental or data-driven studies, examining the thin-ideal media and negative results in the short term. Albeit useful in understanding corollary factors in body-image related concerns, they also contain a level of artificiality that limits their external validity. As noted earlier, social media and the Internet are hard to monitor, and its psychological and behavioral effects on the end-user even more elusive.

[61] Ibid.

In addition to a new focus on isolated thin-ideal messaging an imagery, content on social media may be more harmful than the same content appearing on standard ("static") media because it is an elevated level of engagement. One can easily go beyond passively viewing an image, and now can retweet, like, comment on a picture. With many social media sites that facilitate photo sharing, users have the option to label images with multiple tags (e.g., #proana, #fitspo) that allow images to be classified and more readily searched, making social media a more interactive experience for end users. As more engagement leads to greater impact with consumer awareness and internalization, social media can prove to be a harmful tool in both establishing body ideals as well as fostering body image concerns in its consumers.

Given the harmful effects associated with thin-ideal media content, the ease of access to such images on social media,[62] the degree to which these websites facilitate interaction with a community of like-minded users,[63] and the increasing and widespread use of these channels by a younger, vulnerable audience of preteens and teens, further research into the nature of potentially problematic content on social media websites is warranted.[64]

"Fitspo"

[62] Columbia Broadcasting System New York. (2012). Thinspiration: Doctors concerned with social media sites like Pinterest, Facebook, Tumblr promoting eating disorders. Retrieved from http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2012/07/17/thinspirationdoctors-concerned-with-social-media-sites-promoting-eating-disorders/

[63] Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2007). Personality, individual differences, and Internet use. In A. N. Joinson, K. Y. A. McKenna, T. Postmes & U. D. Reips (Eds.), The Oxford handbook of Internet psychology (pp. 187–204). New York: Oxford University Press.

[64] Bahadur, N. (2013). Twitter thinspiration: Petition to ban thinspo hashtags introduced. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/18/ Twitter-thinspiration-thinspo-petition-ban-hashtags n 3111228.html

Over the last twenty years, public health policy has become increasingly focused on the 'obesity epidemic' said to "threaten a global health catastrophe." As a result, today's discourse on the slender body has 'become associated not only with preferred physical appearance, but also with health, and the medical industry has become a key player in reaffirming the white western ideal, suggesting that fat is not only unattractive but unhealthy. [65] This does not necessarily mean that slimness is a marker of fitness, however, as the white western ideal is equally considered 'unhealthy and unrealistic', but there is a feeling that individuals should 'watch what they eat'.[66]

Some scholars have noted that the cultural ideal of physical attractiveness has shifted toward an emphasis on an extremely fit, toned body in addition to extreme thinness. This ever-increasing prevalence of advertising depicting fit and toned female bodies may create a body image context that mirrors the fashion industry, whereby exposure to models in advertising leads to more negative body image compared with exposure to non-model based advertisements. Media images, including advertisements and celebrities, have evolved toward a "tighter, smoother, more contained body profile."[67] Consistent with this shift, the percentage of women dissatisfied with their muscle tone has doubled since the 1990s.[68]

The popular media often promotes exercise as a means of achieving both the thinness and the firmness that comprise the current body ideal. Content analysis of leading women's magazines over a 30-year period found that the proportion of exercise-related references steadily increased

---

[65] Appleford, Katherine. "'This big bum thing has taken over the world': Considering black women's changing views on body image and the role of celebrity." *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*. Volume 7 Number 2. pp. 193 – 214.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Tenth Edition. January 2004.

[68] Ibid.

with the frequency of exercise articles now surpassing that of diet articles.[69] Another content analysis reported that models in both fitness and fashion magazine advertisements were primarily young, thin Caucasians. [70] The media strongly insinuates that the lean, firm ideal is attainable for anyone willing to devote the time and energy to "work out". However, the inability to achieve this body ideal may leave women feeling dissatisfied with their bodies and experiencing shame or guilt for failing to meet their exercise goals.

Fitspiration, a second-form of thin-ideal promoting content, is a newer media that aims to inspire people to live healthy and fit lifestyles through motivating images and text related to exercise and diet. However, "fitspo" has been criticized for having the same agenda as its more explicit counterpart, "thinspo." Thinspiration sites featured more content related to losing weight or fat, praising thinness, showing a thin pose, and providing food guilt messages than Fitspiration sites. However, when Boepple et. al. conducted a content analysis on a sample of both fifty fitspiration and fifty thinspiration websites, 88% of thinspiration sites and 80% of Fitspiration sites contained one or more of the coded variables of guilt-inducing messages regarding weight or the body, fat/weight stigmatization, the presence of objectifying phrases, and dieting/restraint messages.[71] This messaging was indistinguishable, at times, from pro-anorexia (pro-ana) or "thinspiration" websites. When these thinspo/fitspo images were rated on a variety of weight, eating, and appearance characteristics, the analysis found that both contained strong language inducing guilt about weight or the body, and promoted dieting, restraint and fat and weight

[69] Homan, Kristin. "Athletic-ideal and thin-ideal internalization as prospective predictors of body dissatisfaction, dieting, and compulsive exercise." *Body Image Journal*. Volume 7, Issue 3. June 2010. pp. 240-245.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Boepple, Leah and Thompson, J. Kevin. "A content analytic comparison of fitspiration and thinspiration websites." *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. Volume 49, Issue 1. January 2016. pp. 98-101.

stigmatization. This content analysis indicates that sites supposedly devoted to healthy pursuits (fitness) may also contain thematically similar content.

Millions of followers embrace their regimens for diet and exercise, but increasingly, the drive for "wellness" and "clean eating" has become stealthy cover for more dieting and deprivation. Although messages about healthy exercise and healthy diet can be beneficial, as most of these ideas are promulgated through the Internet and social media, the problem becomes multi-faceted.

First, those accounts and publishers promoting health and well-being are usually no longer professional accredited sources, and give advice that cannot be supported by a formal educational understanding of the topic. Without such backgrounds, these content creators are ignorant of how to navigate language regarding body-related topics, and are unaware of the negative effects that their guilt-inducing rhetoric could potentially have on a viewer/consumer.

Second, evidence suggests engaging in health-behaviors for appearance-motivated reasons is associated with negative body image and eating outcomes. Overall health and well-being are strongly endorsed through the promotion of healthy eating, exercise, and self-care. The general philosophy is one which emphasizes strength and empowerment. For example, a common slogan amongst fitspiration advocates is "Strong is the new skinny". Therefore, fitspiration has the potential for considerable positive social influence on physical and mental health. For example, exercising for appearance-motivated reasons is correlated with higher depressive and eating disorder-like symptoms.[72]

Additionally, the representation and context of images tagged as 'fitspiration' poses a problem. First, the great majority of women in the images exhibit one body shape: a relatively

[72] Boepple, L. et al. "Strong is the new skinny: A content analysis of fitspiration websites." *Body Image*. Volume 17. June 2016. pp 132 – 135.

thin and toned figure. While this figure is less thin and more muscular than that of the models typically found in fashion magazines, it is still unattainable for most women. Further, the repeated promotion of only this one body shape carries the implication that only thin and toned bodies can be fit and healthy. In addition, the images are of everyday women rather than fashion models, and hence likely to give rise to greater social comparison. Second, many of fitspiration's attempts to inspire women towards health and fitness focus on the appearance-related benefits of such a lifestyle. Example quotations include "Do it for looking in the mirror and feeling good about what you see" and "Suck it up now and you won't have to suck it in later". [73]

Data on Thinspo and Fitspo

Limited research has explored the impact viewing such content has on readers; however, results of one study suggest viewers exposed to pro-ana sites experience lower social self-esteem, and report being more likely to exercise and think about their weight in the future. [74] A recent meta-analysis conducted in the U.K. revealed a significant effect of exposure to pro-eating disorder websites on body dissatisfaction ($d = 0.41$) and dieting ($d = 0.68$).[75] Together, these results suggest viewing content that idealizes thinness to the extreme and inundates viewers with the thin-ideal is immediately harmful for viewers and may lead to an increase in future harmful behaviors. Even Internet-content that seemingly promotes healthy lifestyle change may contain problematic messages regarding body image. Recent content analytic research on Healthy Living Blogs (i.e., websites that supposedly document healthy lifestyles of bloggers) led

[73] Tiggemann, Marika. "Exercise to be fit, not skinny: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image." *Body Image Journal*. Volume 15. September 2015. pp. 61 – 67.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Rodgers, Rachel F. et. al. "A Meta-Analysis Examining the Influence of Pro-Eating Disorder Websites on Body Image and Eating Pathology." *European Eating Disorders Review*. Volume 24, Issue 1. January 2016. pp. 3-8.

researchers to conclude most messages found on these blogs normalize restrained eating, food-based guilt, excessive exercise behaviors, objectification of the body, overweight stigmatization, and praise of thin body ideals.[76]

[76] Boepple, L. et al. "Strong is the new skinny: A content analysis of fitspiration websites." *Body Image*. Volume 17. June 2016. pp 132 – 135.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF FEMALE BODY IMAGE

In 2015, curvy bodies come to the forefront of fashion and popular culture. Kim Kardashian West 'breaks the Internet' with a magazine cover of her curvy backside." Meanwhile, American beauty ideals have evolved: the curvaceous bodies of Kim Kardashian West and Beyoncé have become iconic fueling a movement that promotes body acceptance -- merging a Western thin-ideal with a curvier ideal seen in other cultures.

The modern-day landscape for body image and the societal ideal for females has become increasingly ambiguous and almost double-sided. While there is a movement for body positivity, which will be later discussed in this thesis, there is still a push for increased thinness, now veiled under different names.

Thick: A New Ideal Trend

As seen above, the literature suggests that cultural pressures placed on women to be thin have led to widespread levels of body dissatisfaction in the US, and a high incidence of disordered eating behaviors, which can eventually manifest in eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. However, popular culture and media has now created a relatively new body ideal. Recent literature suggests that cultural assimilation is at work in the US, as this is a body shape that brings together aspects of black and white beauty, seen to be embodied by Kim Kardashian, due to her full-figured bottom and thighs, and her very petite waist. An archetype now coined as ‘slim-thick,’ this recent trend has been an important influence in shaping young women’s notions of attractiveness, by encouraging a common concept of body image and desirability across racial groups. Indeed, operating as an ‘exotic other’, who sits somewhere between black and white beauty, Kim Kardashian and the ‘slim-thick’ ideal perhaps offer an

example of cultural assimilation, and yet they also work to exaggerate cultural stereotypes, encouraging a notion of beauty that is unrealistic, and far outside the reach of ordinary women.

In Appleford's case study, those aged between 19 and 25 especially provided a greater indication of a shift in attitude, and a move towards the new "slim-thick" beauty aesthetic.[77] This centered on a more exaggerated hourglass figure, which consisted of a very slim waist, large hips and a big bottom increasingly appealed to black and white audiences alike as it combined a desire for both slimness and fuller-figured curves.

The literature studied notes that female success in is still largely dependent on adopting a white aesthetic. As Wissinger notes, '[w]ith very few exceptions, successful black models in the fashion industry have European American-looking hair and features'. Not only do they tend to be light-skinned with small features and straight hair, they also ascribe to the thin bodily proportions of the white aesthetic.

Kim Kardashian who although Caucasian, is notoriously "slim-thick" and especially big-bottomed. Much of Kim Kardashian's celebrity has developed out of constant media interest surrounding her voluptuous figure, big bottom, and very small waist, can be viewed as an example of cultural appropriation, using black sexuality as a mechanism for fueling celebrity fame. Alternatively, whether her image is an example of cultural assimilation, which incorporates a big bottom into the white aesthetic, thus converting it into a site of cultural value, or one of cultural appropriation, bringing black ideals to a traditionally "white aesthetic," is still open for debate. Kardashian arguably occupies a middle space, which is not quite black, but not

[77] Appleford, Katherine. "'This big bum thing has taken over the world': Considering black women's changing views on body image and the role of celebrity." *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*. Volume 7 Number 2. pp. 193 – 214.

quite white. She embodies the curvaceous aspects of a more diverse, colored ideal, but balances this with thinness, situating her closer to a dominant white ideal.

In some respects, 'slim-thick' can be understood as bridging notions of beauty, and creating an 'exotic' other that brings together the desirable qualities from both black and white beauty ideals. Even the term 'slim-thick' indicates a cultural assimilation, combining the aspirations for curves and thickness, alongside the normative requirement of slimness but it also integrates black and white beauty practices. Increasingly concerned with policing and disciplining their bodies, whether through diet, exercise, or fashion, it seems that the 'cult of thinness' is spreading, and that a common beauty aesthetic is emerging due to popular culture in the US. Curves may still be celebrated, but as a diverse range of women move closer to the white aesthetic, there is a growing sense that they should be balanced with a desire for slimness.

Note that this 'slim-thick' look, however, is something of a paradox, as it requires women to gain weight in some places but not in others, and thus it poses the "greatest challenge to achieve." It is largely considered a very unnatural, "unauthentic" look, which is virtually impossible for most women to attain through normal diet and exercise. In fact, there is a strong suspicion that even Kim Kardashian has only been able to achieve her shapely bottom and very slim waist with the help of cosmetic surgery. In combining the desire for curves with the desire for thinness, 'slim thick' is widely considered to be an 'unrealistic' look, as it was so very difficult to achieve, and believed to be largely the product of photo editing and cosmetic surgery in the case of celebrities.

Yet, despite these young women recognizing that this ideal is a largely 'unrealistic' ambition, it is nevertheless a shape that they find very desirable, in part because it is seen to

make women more physically and sexually attractive across the racial divide. This did not prevent those young and their peers from pursuing this ideal through diet, exercise, and fashion.

CHAPTER SIX

MARKETING AND INEQUALITY

Inequality of the Sexes: Men's Role in Body Image

Another important factor that helps cultivate a society's "ideal" female body is a concept known as the "male gaze." Although male validation is a more traditional concept that is restricted to heterosexual, cis gender women, the assessment of heterosexual boys' beauty perceptions is another understudied aspect of girls' perceptions of desirable body shapes. Studies conducted with women from diverse backgrounds suggest that they overestimate what levels of thinness men find attractive.

Men as a Target Market

Content analyses show how women are constantly displayed in sexual roles in advertising. For instance, rather than being shown in whole, women's bodies are frequently shown only as isolated body parts such as bare stomachs, cleavage, and thighs, which contributes to their sexual objectification. Sexual objectification occurs when people separate women's sexual body parts or functions from the entire person, reducing women to the status of mere instruments and regarding their bodies as capable of representing them. When bodies become dissociated from an individual, thin-ideal content in media can serve as a better catalyst to body dissatisfaction. The objectifying gaze is conceptualized as visually inspecting or staring at a woman's body or sexual body parts.[78] The U.S.A. marketing and media normalizes this gaze when the camera lens focuses less on an individual's face, and more on their body. This

[78] Gervais, Sarah. et. al. "My Eyes Are Up Here: The Nature of the Objectifying Gaze Toward Women." *Sex Roles*. December 2013, Volume 69, Issue 11. pp. 557-570.

phenomenon is consistent with the idea that women may internalize the male gaze and self-objectify, which in turn leads them to exhibit the objectifying gaze toward other women

Content analyses have traced male role portrayals in advertising from the late 1950s and there has been a steady stream of studies exploring constructions of masculinity in advertising and the mass media. Back in 1986, Mazur noted that men place more importance on the physical attractiveness of women than women do on the physical attractiveness of men. As a result, women's social opportunities have traditionally been more affected by their physical beauty than are men's, so that women are under more pressure to conform to an ideal of beauty.

Why are women at more pains than men to meet the societal standard of a beautiful body? Several studies that have asked men and women to list the most attractive features of the other sex almost always show men giving top choice to physical attributes, whereas women indicate preference for personality traits. Whether because of genetic differences, or a persistent bias in socialization, men are reliably more visually interested than are women in the physical bodies of the other sex. Sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze. Women may feel more pressure than men to conform to a body ideal due to this male gaze.

The incentive of the male gaze works two ways: it creates an idea of what an ideal female should look like through ads with a male target market, and the male gaze is also used as a component of the ideal state for female consumers. The subtlety of body ideal imagery is reinforced through this male validation loop. Ads directed at men oftentimes contain women who, for lack of a better term, are the "reward" for the men who purchase the good or service being advertised. In these ads which reinforce traditionalist gender roles, an objectified woman is a component of a heterosexual man's ideal state. When these women portrayed in male-targeted

ads adhere to the thin-ideal, this further reinforces what type of body is established as the superior or attractive. This again strengthens the logic sequence of establishing body ideals for women, as men begin to internalize the same expectation and the same ideals. These male-targeted ads, which may be seen by women, have a serious effect on female attitudes in the pursuit of an ideal body.

The male gaze in female-targeted marketing. On the other hand, the male gaze has been used by marketers as something females should aspire to obtain. Similarly, in ads targeted at heterosexual women, the male gaze is a component of a heterosexual women's ideal state. Ads directed at women oftentimes contain men looking at a woman in a sexually interested manner, and this male gaze is used as a reward for women who buy the good or service being targeted. Thin-ideal imagery is used subtly in traditional marketing in these instances, which again establishes a body ideal that is deemed attractive by the opposite sex – one women should strive to have so they can be more desirable for men.

This gaze is not limited to traditional marketing. In thinspiration and fitspiration tagged content, imagery often contains language that refers to this gaze: "Do it for the second-takes," and "Suck it up now so you won't have to suck it in later," are examples of captions that allude to the (usually male) gaze. The establishment of gender roles and goal of adhering to a societal body ideal established by marketing and advertising are again toxic to a female consumer's self-concept and body image.

The Role of Feminism and Male Body Image

Establishing a thin-ideal for women to adhere to is inherently a feminist issue. By picking at flaws in women's bodies and emphasizing standards through marketing/societally-established ideals, society is negating the value of women. It is an inherent implication that women cannot be successful or be a value-add if they don't adhere to this thin-ideal, diminishing a women's purpose to be merely an object to look at, a victim of male gaze.

To argue that consumer body image and the societal establishment of body ideals is only a female concern would be false. The problem spans across gender and sexuality. Muscle dysmorphia, the pressure to have a lean and athletic build, is the male equivalent of thin-ideal body dysmorphia in females. In addition to this, muscle dysmorphia spills into male gender roles regarding lifestyle. Those men who choose not to participate in sports or athletic activity, usually a pre-requisite for obtaining this male idealized figure, are often shamed for doing so. Masculinity is deeply integrated with the idea of the male muscle-ideal, and lifestyle around this ideal.

However, as argued before, a greater emphasis is placed on female physical attractiveness and thinness – oftentimes linking it to success and an ideal life state. Additionally, although male body image is an issue that needs to be addressed, female body image has been more historically prevalent, and there is more data regarding the topic. Male body image is important to acknowledge, but truly examining this societal problem is outside of the scope of this thesis.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Media Literacy

Media, a term used frequently throughout this thesis, refers to all electronic or digital means and print or artistic visuals used to transmit messages, whether it hinges upon marketing a product/service, an awareness campaign, or simple content sharing. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. Media literate youth and adults are better able to understand the complex messages we receive from television, radio, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, video games, music, and all other forms of media.[79] Media literacy empowers consumers to be critical thinkers, active listeners, and effective communicators. While media literacy does raise critical questions about the impact of media and technology, it is not an anti-media movement. Rather, it represents a coalition of concerned individuals and organizations, citizen, and consumer groups, who seek a more enlightened way of understanding our media environment.

Potter defines media literacy as a tool that can serve to educate consumers to be active, critical processors of the messages we receive through the media – whether it be advertising, entertainment, or news.[80] It involves teaching consumers to understand media as industrial institutions, and how that structure influences the visual, aural, and written content of messages. Media literacy programs attempt to educate consumers of *why* messages are presented in a certain manner, and discuss *how* such messages might affect the consumer, providing individuals with skills to decode messages and counterargue them.

---

[79] What is Media Literacy? (n.d.). Retrieved March 30, 2017, from http://medialiteracyproject.org/learn/media-literacy/.

[80] Ibid.

Most media literacy programs have been implemented in elementary and high schools and universities as supplementary units to existing curricula. For example, studies show that among college students, even one-time interventions are effective in reducing social comparison to the thin ideal depicted in the media. Media literacy education has also proven beneficial in moderating consumer's response to the ideal female body image propagated in the media while improving the women's own body image.

While programs based in academia are promising, they do not have the potential to reach all the at-risk population. Andsager concluded that a "multisystem approach is necessary to empower youth and adults" to start to challenge media-propagated images of narrow and harmful idealized bodies.[81] As part of this multisystem approach, social media's expansive reach is capable of dramatically expanding media literacy programs' dissemination on body image.

A paradigm example of media literacy education on self-image is the 2006 Dove *Evolution* film, a 75-second montage depicting the transformation of an ordinary woman's face into one "suitable" for a magazine make-up advertisement, which depicts the numerous people involved to mask flaws, style the model, edit the photo, etc. In doing so, the commercial exposes the unrealistic and artificial nature of media portrayals of women and aims to discourage viewers from engaging in social comparison with such idealized portrayals. Within a month after its release, the *Evolution* film had more than 1.7 million views on YouTube. An experiment conducted with English adolescent girls found that viewing the film seemed to produce immediate benefits regarding social comparison to thin-ideal advertising images.

[81] Andsager, J. L. (2014). Research directions in social media and body image. *Sex Roles, 71*(11), 407-413.

Body Positivity

Although this correlation between representation and body image is evident, why do we keep revisiting this? The landscape is clearly not changing, and may in fact be getting worse given technological advances and the current political landscape. Body positivity is a type of media literacy that attempts to diversify representation and affect change in the body image landscape. Across the fashion industry, the status and representation of 'plus size' or 'curvy'-figured women have changed significantly over the last decade, and across the fashion spectrum curvier women are becoming much more visible. This diversity in body size is a step in the right direction, but showing plus-sized imagery in fashion is still seen as an abnormality. Companies are often praised for displaying curvier figures in their marketing campaigns. This blurs the lines between whether these firms are truly attempting to dispel the thin-ideal and normalize diversity of bodies in advertising, or whether they are doing so for publicity and monetary purposes.

In the last several years, marketers have started to use "nonidealized" models in advertisements (i.e., "Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty"). Little is known, however, about the effects of "nonidealized" advertising on consumers and whether this type of advertising—when compared to idealized advertising—is truly beneficial for the branded products promoted in these ads. Models are a mirror for many young women and, most agree, should project an image of beauty and health rather than offer the perception of encouraging eating disorders.

When exposed to advertising models (more specifically, body images), consumers might engage in two simultaneous processes. For one, they might begin a model-evaluation process in which they judge the trustworthiness of the model. A primary factor in an advertisement's effectiveness is the trustworthiness of the source. And, in fact, consumers have strong intentions to judge the trustworthiness of advertising sources. This might be a conscious process, as

consumers probably are aware that they are judging the trustworthiness of a model. At the same time, however, it can be expected that consumers who view an advertisement also engage in a self-evaluation process. And, in those cases, comparing oneself with a model in an advertisement might affect a woman's self-esteem. As discussed earlier, social comparison is a central feature of human social life, as people have a natural drive to evaluate their own attributes by comparing themselves to others.

Researchers repeatedly have shown that women who view the "ideal" thin images in the lab experience lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction than do women who view neutral images.[82] If idealized images of models reduce self-esteem, the natural question is: Does the use of nonidealized images increase self-esteem? One piece of recent research demonstrated that using nonidealized images of physical attractiveness in advertisements could have a positive impact on viewers' self-esteem. Particularly, participants with an average body-mass index reported higher self-esteem after viewing advertisements that featured extremely heavy models—a confidence resulting from feelings of dissimilarity with the models that caused them to feel thin. Antioco et. al. conducted a study which found that in general, exposure to nonidealized models leads to higher self-esteem compared to exposure to idealized models.[83]

Governments, politicians, health professionals, researchers and advocacy groups have increasingly acknowledged poor body image as a public health issue requiring individual- and macro-level intervention. Alternatively, positive body image is associated with a range of beneficial health behaviors and outcomes, including increased physical activity, fruit and

[82] Antioco, Michael et. al. "Take Your Pick, Kate Moss or the Girl Next Door? The Effectiveness of Cosmetics Advertising." *Journal of Advertising Research*. March 2012. pp. 15- 32.

[83] Ibid.

vegetable consumption and improved emotional health.[84] Despite an increasing focus on social policy approaches to promoting positive body image, and that public support is often critical to their uptake and success, consumer opinion on this type of intervention has largely been neglected.

Social activism and social marketing methods are offered as two recent strategies for offsetting the negative effects of media influences. The wave of inclusion driving the focus surrounding media exposure of "ideal bodies," but it is not the end of the conversation. The goal of representation is body neutrality and normalization, a point at which a deviation from what is considered the uniform ideal does not make headlines. Diversity and inclusion are the standard.

Because both poor health and media illiteracy are systemic problems, the solutions must also be systemic; they are economic, political, and social in scope; and they have regional, national, and global dimension. In addition to addressing this problem at a societal level, we must change our discourse at an individual and grassroots level for our societal efforts to be effective. Only by tackling media's representation on both an individual and societal standpoint can our culture move forward from widespread consumer body dissatisfaction.

Several media messages must be identified and challenged in preventive programs. These include the notion that beauty is a woman's primary objective, that thinness is crucial for success and happiness, and that it is normal and acceptable for a woman to be ashamed and anxious about her body and appearance. Unfortunately, these messages do not emanate just from media sources. Peers, family, coaches, teachers, and others help reinforce this socialization of women. It is therefore not enough to teach girls and women to reject problematic media messages.

[84] Neumark-Sztainer D. et. al. "Does body satisfaction matter? Five-year longitudinal associations between body satisfaction and health behaviors in adolescent females and males." *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2006 Aug; 39(2): 244-51.

Rather, positive redefinitions of femininity as multifaceted and self-accepting need to be promoted, along with the desire and skill to resist pressure for thinness and attractiveness.

If we decide that the issue we want to address is this glamorization of individuals with eating disorders, the first step in a social marketing process is deciding what specific "consumer" behavior or attitude we would like to see modified. For instance, we might want to increase knowledge regarding the "true" negative. consequences of dysfunctional eating patterns, hopefully offsetting the unrealistically "positive" outcomes often portrayed in the media. Or perhaps a more extreme goal might be to prevent exposure to movies or TV shows that contain eating disorder story lines. A second step is to gather information regarding which factors motivate or deter consumers from adopting the behavior. A third, crucial step is to segment the audience, based on factors such as at-risk status, stage of change, benefits of adopting the behavior, and so on.[85] Subsequently, such issues as the method of reaching the target audience (i.e., channel analysis) and strategizing an intervention are important, followed by process tracking, which involves evaluating the success of the intervention and possibly revising implementation strategies.

[85] Levine, M. P., Piran, N., & Stoddard, C. (1999). Mission more probable: Media literacy, activism, and advocacy in the prevention of eating disorders. In N. Piran, M. P. Levine, & C. Steiner-Adair (Eds.), Preventing eating disorders: A handbook of interventions and special challenges (pp. 3—25). Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.

Final Words

The literature supports a relationship between mass media consumption and a woman's development of body perception. The literature and the social cognitive theory further support a relationship between women's self-perceptions and their perceived needs to imitate societal standards that are presented through photographic representations of celebrities and models that are published in the media. As we move into a more digital space, the lines of the consumer decision journey and its relationship with body ideal internalization becomes blurred. With the Internet and social media, more exposure puts consumers at a higher risk for internalization, and there is less regulation in marketing due to the ability for consumers to become content creators. With this, the problem of body image is worsening. Regarding thinspiration and fitspiration content, it is not known whether exposure to electronic media is an etiological factor in body image and eating disturbance or whether women with body image disturbance or eating pathology choose to expose themselves to such images at a higher rate than their less distressed counterparts.

Although specific significant correlations between media and both internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction were observed in this analysis, it is important to remember that these variables interact in a much larger context. It is nearly impossible to find the exact origin of body image attitudes. Instead it may be more useful to consider that the variables serve to reinforce one another and strengthen existing attitudes, despite where they originate. Therefore, all the variables noted herein should be considered significant influences on body image attitudes, and the knowledge should be applied to eating disorder prevention/intervention and media literacy campaigns to help attenuate the negative effects. Identifying and quantifying

these effects is critical to inform policy surrounding the presence of pro-eating disorder content online, as well as prevention programs grounded in media literacy.

Ultimately, change needs to occur at an individual level. This problem has still not been alleviated due to our language and attitude regarding body ideals and imagery, at both a micro and macro level. If we do not change our discourse on a grassroots level, then larger societal efforts will not be effective. By monitoring the type of content, we, as consumers, curate for ourselves – recognizing body-ideal imagery to be more media literate – we can begin to instill change.

The idea of female misrepresentation in media was introduced almost a half-century ago; *Killing Us Softly* began to be well disseminated in the 1970s and continues today. Since then, this correlation between media exposure and consumer body dissatisfaction has only continued. Even as we are becoming increasingly aware of this issue, it does not seem to be alleviated. How can we stop portraying images that hurt society? Alternatively, the issue may lie in consumers internalizing an unrealistic ideal.

When introducing this thesis, we noted that the growing prevalence of eating disorders symptomatic of a social problem. Clinical factors cannot solely account for the sharp increases of disordered eating practices over the past half-century. Solving this health issue involves solving this social issue, and vice versa.

Ultimately, if the marketplace continues to consume and buy this body ideal imagery that is selling eating, it is going to continue to sell. Firms will keep feeding thin ideal content to vulnerable consumers, and with advances in technology, consumers can feed these ideas to other consumers, creating a vicious cycle within social media and Internet content. Because of the

power of exposure, the risk of internalizing messages that are dangerous to consumer health has significantly increased. These messages and imagery, as mentioned earlier, are not healthy for neither society nor vulnerable individuals. As consumers, we need to make sure we are not buying these ideas that people keep selling.

Unnati Shukla was born in Houston, Texas on May 1, 1995 and was raised in The Woodlands, Texas. She enrolled in the Plan II Honors Program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2013 with a second major in Marketing in the McCombs School of Business, and studied International Marketing at École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris in 2015. In college, she spearheaded the UT Real Beauty Campaign, was a group fitness instructor at Gregory Gym, and was a member of Texas Spirits and Texas Orange Jackets. She interned for Invenio Media, Nike, and Microsoft over the course of her college career. Unnati graduated in 2017 and plans to work as a Product Marketing Manager for Microsoft in the fall.